

Educator Preparation Guide: Teaching the Holocaust in High School World History

Teaching about the Holocaust is a vital responsibility that requires care, nuance, and clarity. In high school world history, this unit offers students an opportunity to understand how mass atrocity takes shape—through ideology, law, propaganda, silence, and complicity—and how individuals, institutions, and nations respond.

This unit does not ask students to memorize dates or numbers. It asks them to wrestle with human choices, examine how injustice is normalized, and evaluate what justice looks like in the aftermath of injustice. The Holocaust is both a specific event and a universal warning—and this unit helps students explore that tension through inquiry, primary sources, and civic reflection.

Why This Unit Matters

- The Holocaust illustrates how a modern, bureaucratic society can descend into genocide—and what factors make that possible.
- Students analyze individual and collective responsibility, tracing how myths and policies evolve into mass violence.
- The unit supports civic development by asking students to apply historical lessons to modern injustice.
- Students develop critical thinking, source analysis, media literacy, and ethical reasoning through direct engagement with survivor voices and historical documents.
- By connecting global history to present-day questions, this unit encourages students to become more informed and active participants in their world.

Recommended Resources

- USHMM | Teaching Materials Overview: www.ushmm.org
- Echoes & Reflections: www.echoesandreflections.org
- Facing History and Ourselves: www.facinghistory.org

Framing, Language and Terminology

How we frame Holocaust education—through our language, emphasis, and guiding questions—directly shapes students’ understanding of antisemitism, identity, and genocide. Many students (and educators) bring limited or

oversimplified knowledge of the Holocaust and may not fully grasp the diversity of Jewish life or the mechanisms by which hate becomes systemic. This unit is an opportunity to replace flawed narratives with historically grounded, humanizing, and nuanced understandings.

Language

Instead of	Consider	Because
The Jews	Jewish people or Jewish communities	Avoids generalizations and centers humanity and diversity
Jewish religion	Jewish identity or Jewish people	Jewish identity can be religious, cultural, ethnic, or secular
Concentration camps (as a catch-all)	Be specific: labor camps, death camps, transit camps	Clarifies function and intention of different Nazi camp systems
Final Solution (without context)	Nazi plan to murder the Jews of Europe	Avoids euphemisms; reinforces genocidal intent
Others were persecuted too (to minimize Jewish targeting)	Other groups were targeted for persecution, but only Jewish people were targeted for complete annihilation	Provides a clear distinction between groups who were persecuted vs the only group who were specifically targeted for complete annihilation

Common Misconceptions to Disrupt

Misconception	Reframing Guidance
All Jewish people are the same	Emphasize that Jewish identity includes a wide range of cultural, ethnic, and religious experiences across time and geography.
Antisemitism began with Hitler	Provide historical examples of antisemitism in Europe before the 20th century, including laws, myths, and discrimination.
Jewish people went to the camps without resistance	Highlight examples of spiritual, cultural, and armed resistance; resistance was shaped by context, resources, and risk.

Only Jewish people were targeted	Clarify that while other groups were also persecuted, only Jews were targeted for complete annihilation.
Genocide happens suddenly	Help students trace the incremental stages of progression in propaganda, laws, and institutional actions that built towards mass violence over time.
Other countries didn't know until it was too late	Primary sources consistently demonstrate that governments, leaders, and many ordinary citizens (through newspaper coverage) were aware of the persecution of Jewish people in Nazi Germany and Nazi-controlled Europe.

Supporting Question 1: How did false stories (myths and tropes) about the Jewish people shape the actions of nations during the Holocaust?

Historical and Cultural Context

- Antisemitic myths have circulated for centuries across Europe, including conspiracy theories, scapegoating, and dehumanization.
- The Nazis built on these existing beliefs to create a racial ideology that portrayed Jews as a global threat to Germany and Western civilization.

Key Concepts for Educators

- Nazi propaganda embedded antisemitic stories into laws, education, film, and public messaging to justify exclusion and violence.
- These false narratives laid the foundation for widespread public support—or indifference—toward persecution and genocide.
- Antisemitism was not uniquely German. Antisemitic beliefs existed across Europe in the 1930s and 1940s.

Recommended Resources

- Facing History and Ourselves | [The Impact of Nazi Propaganda: Visual Essay](#)
- USHMM | [Nazi Propaganda](#)
- USHMM | [Teaching Materials on Antisemitism and Racism](#)
- Echoes and Reflections | [Antisemitism](#) (video, 14:53)

Supporting Question 2: What do Jewish efforts to flee, and the obstacles they faced, reveal about life under Nazi rule and the international response?

Historical and Cultural Context

- As Nazi persecution escalated, many Jewish families tried to emigrate—but were blocked by strict immigration quotas and indifference from other nations.
- The 1938 Evian Conference revealed that most countries, including the U.S., were unwilling to accept more Jewish refugees.

Key Concepts for Educators

- Fleeing was expensive, dangerous, and often impossible due to legal, financial, and bureaucratic barriers.
- The failure of international actors to intervene or provide asylum enabled the Nazis to continue their policies with minimal outside interference.
- The governments of many western countries refused to adjust immigration policies and quota systems to help fleeing Jewish people.

Recommended Resources

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

- [Americans and the Holocaust](#)
- [The Evian Conference](#)
- [How did leaders, diplomats, and citizens around the world respond to the events of the Holocaust?](#)
- [Voyage of the St. Louis | Holocaust Encyclopedia](#)

Supporting Question 3: How did institutions and groups choose to respond, collaborate, or remain silent as the Holocaust unfolded?

Historical and Cultural Context

- The Holocaust unfolded in phases: legal discrimination, ghettoization, deportation, extermination, and death marches.
- At each phase, individuals and institutions—neighbors, religious leaders, civil servants—made choices about whether to collaborate, resist, or remain silent.

Key Concepts for Educators

- Resistance took many forms: hiding Jews, smuggling food, armed uprisings, and preserving dignity in dehumanizing conditions.
- Inaction and complicity were often shaped by fear, ideology, antisemitism, or perceived powerlessness.

Recommended Resources

- USHMM | [Some Were Neighbors: Choice, human behavior, and the Holocaust](#)
- Facing History and Ourselves | [Recommended Resources for Holocaust and Human Behavior](#)
- USHMM | The Holocaust Encyclopedia
 - [The Movement to Boycott the Berlin Olympics of 1936 | Holocaust Encyclopedia](#)
 - [The Evian Conference, July 1938 | Holocaust Encyclopedia](#)
 - [Holocaust Encyclopedia Overview Invasion of Poland](#)
 - [Holocaust Encyclopedia Overview of Denmark](#)

Supporting Question 4: What did the International Military Tribunals held at Nuremberg prosecute, and what lessons can they teach us about responding to injustice today?

Historical and Cultural Context

- After World War II, the Allies established the International Military Tribunals held at Nuremberg to hold Nazi leaders accountable for war crimes and crimes against humanity.
- While the International Military Tribunals held at Nuremberg set legal precedents, they also left gaps—many complicit individuals were never prosecuted.

Key Concepts for Educators

Key Concepts for Educators

- Nuremberg focused on top leaders and established international legal frameworks, but did not address many forms of structural and bureaucratic complicity.

Note for Educators: This supporting question builds toward benchmark **9.4.22.6**: *“Draw on historical examples to propose a solution to a pressing global issue.”* Students meet this benchmark through the Taking Informed Action section, where they apply lessons from the Holocaust to a current global crisis.

Recommended Resources

- USHMM | [International Military Tribunals at Nuremberg](#)
- Facing History and Ourselves | [Justice and Judgement after the Holocaust](#)